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In the Buying Mode: Smart Shopping Tips for Kitchen Gear Purchases

Abstract

[Excerpt] Buying foodservice equipment is kind of like buying a car; it doesn't take a lot of experience or skill to make a good purchase as long as you know what you want and are savvy about how to find it. While a detailed purchasing guide to all types of foodservice equipment could fill a book, this article gives you a starting point for evaluating your needs and making informed decisions when it comes to putting your restaurant kitchen together.

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Comments

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In the

By Stephani Robson

BUYING

Smart Mode Shopping Tips for Kitchen Gear Purchases

Buying foodservice equipment is kind of like buying a car; it doesn't take a lot of experience or skill to make a good purchase as long as you know what you want and are savvy about how to find it. While a detailed purchasing guide to all types of foodservice equipment could fill a book, this article gives you a starting point for evaluating your needs and making informed decisions when it comes to putting your restaurant kitchen together.

Most restaurant kitchens appear to be packed wall to wall with metal: ranges, broilers, racks, pans, tables, shelves — the list goes on. In general, “equipment” refers to any item used to store, prepare, cook, chill or clean up after food, whereas the term “small wares” is used to describe anything routinely washed in a dishwasher: pots, pans, utensils and other tools. Foodservice designers and kitchen consultants generally work with equipment only, leaving you on your own to select your small wares. (Because small ware needs vary so much from restaurant to restaurant, we'll leave those for another article, and instead focus here on equipment.)

Make a List and Check it Twice

When planning a new restaurant kitchen, you need to start with a very clear vision of the type of food you intend to prepare and, even more important, how you intend to prepare it. Your approach to your menu will suggest what equipment you likely will need. Will you make your rolls from scratch, bake premade ones, or buy them ready to serve from a local bakery? How about desserts or soups? Do you see yourself doing any significant meat-cutting, or will all meats come preportioned? Will you serve a lot of fresh greens? And is everything cooked a la minute and plated in the kitchen, or will you sometimes offer a buffet or do off-site catering that relies on bulk cooking? Each of these decisions influences the types and sizes of equipment you will need, as does the approach to preparing the dishes. For example, if you plan to cook your five-alarm chili only twice a week and hold the leftovers chilled (after all, doesn't chili always taste better the next day?), you'll probably make different equipment decisions than if you want to make that day's chili fresh each morning.

One approach to developing an equipment wish list is to make a list of the types of food you intend to prepare down one side of a sheet of paper or spreadsheet, and to fill in the kitchen equipment and/or technique you think you'll need to use for each item across the top of the page. In each cell of the sheet, indicate the role that the piece of equipment plays in producing the menu item. Here's an example of how you might set up such a list:

Menu Item	Open Burner	Deep Fryer	Oven	Broiler	Slicer	Tilt Kettle	Refrigerator	Etc.
Herbed fries		X						
French bread pizza				X (finish)	X (toppings)	X (sauce)	X (sauce, toppings)	
Pork chop	X (brown)		X (finish)				X (meat)	
...and so on...								

Create a "wish list" of menu items you intend to prepare in your restaurant, and determine which pieces of equipment you'll need to offer them. This exercise will help you both determine your equipment needs, and identify ways to be more economical and efficient. For example, you might choose to remove one or two items from the menu to eliminate the need for a certain piece of gear, or otherwise modify the menu to maximize use of necessary key equipment.

I like to prepare this kind of list on a computer using a spreadsheet tool, which allows me to add more columns as I think of additional equipment items I might need. Don't forget to include columns for storage, preparation and cleanup equipment: refrigerators, dishwashers, pot sinks, worktables and so on.

Once you have completed your list, count the number of X's in each column. Is there any equipment that you will use for only one or two menu items? Unless the menu items that use this equipment are signature dishes you think you will sell in large quantities, you might not make the best use of your kitchen space or budget if you buy equipment you may not use very much. Can you make those dishes using other methods, or is there another way to make more productive use of that equipment? Let's say you have two side dishes on your menu you propose to steam, and have listed a steamer on your equipment list to support those sides. Look through your menu to see if there are other items that you could steam rather than sauté or boil. Con-

versely, perhaps you could steam those two sides in smaller batches on the range top rather than in larger pans in a steamer, allowing you to drop the steamer from your equipment list and, more importantly, your budget.

At the same time, see if there are pieces of equipment that have a large number of X's on your list, which suggests a strong reliance on that item. Can your staff realistically handle 80 percent of your menu coming off the

range without bottlenecks or delays? Can you rethink the menu to spread the demand across more than one cook, or will you need multiple cooks using multiple burners (meaning you'll need a lot of range top). If your restaurant is small or your menu very simple, a heavy reliance on just one piece of cooking equipment may not be necessarily a bad thing. But it's better to decide upfront how you plan to operate than to discover you are overloading or underusing your valuable resources. And most certainly equipment like refrigerators and dishwashers will have lots of X's, which is just fine — knowing how much demand you'll have for these pieces of equipment helps you decide what size or how many to buy.

Now, of course, menus change (and so does your staff) so it isn't realistic to get too detailed as you decide how you want to execute each dish. But having a good idea of what degree of batch cooking, a la minute production, meat and vegetable preparation, and baking you plan to do will greatly simplify your equipment planning.

Benefits and Features: a 12-point Inspection

You can evaluate kitchen equipment using a 12-step process. Here are the factors to address as you consider each item on your list:

1. Functionality. Does the equipment do what you want it to do, and does it do it well? This may seem like a ridiculous question, but it's actually an important one. Just as you'd evaluate a truck on its ability to haul a boat or a trailer, you should determine whether the equipment you're considering can consistently deliver the temperature you need, whether it's for cooking or cooling. How easy is it to adjust temperature, and how rapidly does the equipment respond? For some pieces of equipment, features beyond temperature may be important — say, its ability to be adjusted for different products, or moved from place to place. Knowing ahead of time precisely what you want the equipment to do will help you make an effective selection.

Another consideration related to functionality is durability. Will the equipment continue to perform well over time? Durable equipment will be made from quality materials, well assembled with no loose welds or screws, and will stand up to the everyday abuse that kitchen equipment tends to receive. Testing tables and racks by standing on the shelves or frame is a common durability test; if the metal bends, you're going to want to choose another brand. Give equipment a good shake, and slam the oven door shut a couple of times. If the vendor looks concerned, that's a sign they are not confident in the product, and good quality equipment should be able to take this kind of handling because you know that's what occurs in the kitchen on a daily basis.

2. Flexibility. Think of the kitchen gadgets cluttering up your cabinets at home. Many of them are "one-use wonders": pizzelle makers, or corn holders, or butter spreaders in the shape of cows. Well, the commercial foodservice world has similar products: things that are designed to do one or two things well, but that's about it. That's fine as long as those are for one or two things that you

prepare frequently, but what happens when guests' tastes change and food items fall in and out of fashion? You need kitchen equipment that can adapt as your menu adapts. Carefully consider how many types of items you can prepare with the equipment you are considering. A range top is enormously flexible — with the right combination of heat input and small wares, you can cook just about anything on a range, assuming your quantities are not large. Likewise, a combination oven-steamer can produce a range of items cooked in batches and, although excessive, may end up saving you money if it reduces the number of pieces of equipment you need to buy.

3. Capacity. How much food will you need to produce at once? How many dishes per hour is your restaurant likely to need to wash during peak times? Some careful thought needs to be put toward volume estimates across your menu as you plan your equipment needs. In general, you want to allow for your anticipated volumes plus an additional 20 percent to 25 percent of excess capacity for each piece of equipment so that you'll have flexibility in menu offerings as conditions change, and be able to handle moderate increases in volume as your business grows.

Here's an example: Imagine that you plan to offer a 4-ounce portion of french fries as a side dish with all of your burgers and other hot sandwiches. You need to figure out how many portions of fries you think you'll sell in your busiest possible hour of operation. If you think you'll serve about 100 covers an hour at your busiest, and 50 percent of those covers order a dish that comes with fries, you'll be looking at preparing 50 X 4 ounces = 200 ounces, or 12.5 pounds of fries in an hour. Allowing for mistakes, underestimating and future menu items that offer fries on the side, you will want to add another 25 percent of needed capacity to your originally estimated 12.5 pounds of fries, increasing that figure to just over 16.6 pounds of fries per hour. So you'll need to find a fryer that can easily handle at least 16 pounds of

fries per hour, but you probably don't need one that can handle 50 or 60 pounds per hour. This, of course, assumes that you don't need this fryer to cook other items besides fries. If you do, you need to do a similar calculation for each item that is cooked in the fryer and add up your requirements to ensure you have the right capacity.

It helps to have a rough idea of your capacity needs before you talk with a kitchen equipment vendor so that they can assist you in finding the right size of equipment for your operation. If you don't have any idea, the tendency is to overbuy, which in the long run costs you more money in utilities, time and space as well as upfront expense.

4. Space needs. Speaking of space, make sure your building can accommodate the equipment you're considering. Many an operator with a basement kitchen has discovered to his dismay that the 12-burner range he just bought can't fit down the stairs. Early in my foodservice design career, I made the mistake of not checking the dimensions of a very large dishwasher being proposed for a new hotel project; that dishwasher would have had to have been craned into the building before the exterior walls were up to get into the kitchen (much to my relief, that project never got to the construction stage). Check and double-check the size of doorways, aisles, staircases and other physical barriers in your building against the dimensions of the equipment you're considering. Check also that you have enough room to maneuver the equipment into position in your kitchen and, if the equipment requires ventilation under a hood, ensure that the hood extends a minimum of 6 inches beyond the piece of equipment both at the front and on either side so that the hood can remove smoke and heat effectively.

5. Utility needs. Most cooking equipment is available in either electric or gas formats, and in most cases — certainly for ranges, broilers, ovens and fryers — you'll want to choose gas. (For more information, see "A Heated Debate: Weighing the Pros and Cons of Gas Versus Electric in Your Startup,"

RS&G, April 2008). If your property is far from an urban area, liquid propane gas may be your only option, but whether it's propane from a tank or natural gas from the local utility, gas is preferred because of its efficient heating and speedy control properties. But sometimes electricity is the way to go, for induction burners on buffet lines, and for beverage equipment like coffee brewers. Equipment that uses electricity for heating or for a motor is often available with alternative power specifications; as a rule, the higher the voltage, the greater the power capacity and the more economically and efficiently the equipment operates. This, of course, assumes that you have access to 208-volt/three-phase power in your building. Check with your electrician first to make sure your building can support that big pizza dough mixer you have your eye on.

6. Energy efficiency. In the past three years, restaurant utility costs have soared, making it even harder for most operations to show a healthy profit. So anything you can do to reduce energy use makes good business sense as well as sound environmental sense. While heating and cooling your restaurant accounts for the largest share of most operations' energy costs, kitchen equipment demands are a close second and can really make a difference in your monthly bills if you select your equipment wisely. Happily, in the last few years many food-service equipment manufacturers have introduced energy-saving models of most major categories of cooking equipment. You can find a short list of recommended makes and models for some categories of equipment at www.energystar.gov, and at www.dinegreen.com (the Web site of the Green Restaurant Association).

Even if a piece of equipment is not formally listed as an energy saver by organizations like these, there are features to look for that will help you conserve energy costs. One is a standby or power-saver mode that reduces power to the equipment until it is needed. For cooking surfaces like

griddles, look for multiple controls that let you operate just part of the griddle during quieter times. Options like demand-based hood controls may cost a bit more at the outset, but they save you in utility costs because they reduce the operation of the hood's fan when it is not needed. And look also for equipment such as dishwashers, prerinse sprayers, and steamers that reduce water use; water and sewer charges also are climbing, and using equipment that minimizes water going down the drain will have a real effect on your bottom line over time.

It is wise to check with your local utility before making equipment decisions, because there may be ordinances mandating energy efficiency for specific equipment items in your area. And on a positive note, the utility may offer rebates or other incentives to help you purchase energy-smart kitchen equipment.

7. Cleanability. Most kitchen equipment is made from easily cleaned materials: stainless steel, hard plastic or chrome-plated metal. But if those materials are combined in such a way that it is cumbersome or time-consuming to clean effectively, your staff will have more trouble keeping your kitchen shipshape. For equipment that dismantles for cleaning, such as slicers, check to see that the disassembly/reassembly process is both quick and intuitive, and that it doesn't rely on lots of small parts, which have a tendency to get lost. For other equipment, look for smooth, crack-free joints where edges meet; easy-to-access food or grease catchers; firmly attached gaskets; coved interior corners; and easily removed and replaced dials. A common cleaning problem stems from the sophisticated but poorly designed electronic controls on many pieces of equipment. They often fail when exposed to water, which is entirely possible if you have a less-than-meticulous cleanup crew. When talking with your equipment vendor, ask for a demonstration of how the equipment is designed to be cleaned, and decide for yourself whether it is too awkward or fussy for your kind of operation.

New or Used?

Many restaurateurs try to keep the budget in line by buying only used equipment, or by leasing rather than purchasing. The new versus used question is one worthy of deeper consideration. Kitchen gear is not unlike cars in this respect; some used cars are excellent purchases. Others are a clear example of throwing money away. Here are a few tips to keep in mind when hunting for good used equipment buys, and how to avoid false economy.

Simple equipment has fewer things that can go wrong with it, and therefore it may make sense to buy simple items secondhand rather than new. Tables, sinks, racks, shelves, carts and the like can be excellent used purchases provided that they are clean and serviceable. Some prep equipment like mixers or slicers, as long as they are from a reputable manufacturer, can be good used buys because they tend to last for years as long as they have been well maintained. Complicated equipment like ice machines, ovens and fryers, on the other hand, are often not the best equipment to buy used. In addition, buying used gear in these categories could mean you will be stuck with last-generation technology, giving up labor- and energy-saving features of newer equipment.

Make sure you can test used equipment before you buy it. The risk you take with buying used equipment at auctions or over the Internet are that you usually have no idea how well the item works until it appears in your restaurant. Again, save those kinds of purchases for simple equipment that is easy and inexpensive to repair.

Be prepared to do some serious cleaning. One restaurateur I know was able to put together his entire kitchen for very little money using secondhand equipment, but he spent well over a month of his time (and a lot of elbow grease) cleaning it and getting it in tip-top shape. He was willing to “donate” his valuable time to this task. Are you?

8. Maintenance concerns. Of course, you'll want to keep your investment working well. Some equipment will give years of good service with very little maintenance. Others, such as refrigerators, need periodic attention to perform at their best. This explains why some equipment is better purchased used: The simpler the equipment, the more likely you'll be able to pick up good secondhand deals that will last. In general, anything with a compressor is an iffy choice when purchased used: Refrigeration performs best when routinely serviced, something that a failing restaurant is likely to overlook as it scrambles to make payroll or to pay suppliers.

Ask your equipment vendor the following: How frequent or involved is the recommended preventive maintenance program for that piece of equipment? Is it easy to access key components for routine maintenance and repair? Are replacement parts readily available and reasonably priced? (You don't want to be waiting for the next shipment of \$1,500 motherboards from France.) And is there good *local* maintenance support for your equipment? It is tempting to get the latest and greatest gizmo that you saw at the trade shows, but it's of little use to you if your local repair contractor doesn't have experience with it or

carry parts for it. Follow up with your own research online and through fellow restaurateurs in your area.

9. Manufacturer reputation. Just as with cars, some brands of equipment are notorious for their fickleness: When they run, they're great, but when they don't run.... Here's where asking around makes good sense. Restaurant owners are usually only too happy to talk about what they like and don't like about what's in their kitchens. Visiting a few operations you admire, even if they aren't producing the same kind of dining experience that you plan to, can be very helpful to identify the preferred brands in your area.

10. Relationship to other equipment. Sometimes choosing complementary equipment from the same manufacturer can be a smart decision because it is all designed to fit together. It's a lot easier to install and maintain a cooking line where there are no gaps between equipment items, and everything is at the same height and depth. You may also want to have a single interlocking position for the gas manifolds on each item, making installation faster for your pipe fitter and less expensive for you. Alternatively, you may want each item to have its own quick-disconnect flexible gas

connection at the rear, which is always a good idea. Just make sure to select casters instead of feet to make moving the equipment easier when the time comes to disconnect for cleaning. Do you plan to put that convection oven on a rack, or slide that dish dolly under a dish table when you're not using it? Check those dimensions to make sure that everything will fit as you've planned. I've seen lots of well-meaning restaurant owners driven crazy by garbage cans that are just an inch too high to fit under a prep table.

11. Features. Got an open kitchen? You may want your equipment to be a bit flashier in appearance than plain old stainless steel. Some manufacturers offer colored front and side panels, optional brass fittings, and other beauty treatments for equipment that will be in the public eye, but expect to pay more for these frills. There are also dozens of options for specialized applications: meat probes on ovens; blower dryers on dishwashers; built-in pot fillers for kettles — the list goes on. Decide precisely what you need early on, and try not to be swayed by bells and whistles that go beyond your requirements. Sometimes these are included in the base price for the equipment, but often they are not, plus these fancy features may add to your

maintenance load if they are finicky. Again, treat these features like you would consider options on a car: some you really can do without, even if they are pretty cool.

12. Cost. You'll notice I've put cost last, even though for most operators, cost is a crucial factor in the purchase decision. I am not trying to diminish cost's importance, but I think it's valuable to make sure you select the right piece of equipment for your operation by thinking about the previous 11 topics rather than focusing purely on the budget. After all, just like with a car purchase, there are ways to get the equipment you want for a lower price. But, also just like cars, equipment costs you money not just when you purchase it, but across its life span. The smart restaurateur considers life cycle cost when choosing equipment, so that all that hard-earned capital is applied most effectively.

Caveat Emptor (Buyer Beware)

As you can see, making good kitchen equipment decisions is mostly a function of doing your homework: knowing what you need and why, recognizing the opportunities and limitations of your building, collecting information from multiple sources, and staying informed. Because of time pressures during the restaurant development process, you may be tempted to take shortcuts and just buy what the local dealer has in stock because it's quick and it's easy. Try to resist — just as you wouldn't buy the first operable car that you see, you shouldn't be buying any piece of equipment unless you are certain that it works for your operation at a price you can afford.

Approaching kitchen equipment purchases with good information and clear objectives will save you time and money both during startup and once you are up and running. Don't be afraid to ask questions and to compare what you hear from equipment vendors with what you learn from your peers — the more you know going in, the better your equipment decisions will be.

RS&G

✓ Checklist

Finding Reliable Information on Equipment

In the past 10 years, thanks to the Internet and local and national restaurant trade shows, it's getting easier to find accurate and detailed information about kitchen equipment without having to wade through binder catalogs or rely wholly on your local equipment dealer. I have already mentioned several sources for equipment information: vendors, online communities and your fellow operators. More specifically, here are some resources you'll want to check out as you explore your options:

- ✓ **This magazine and its partner site, www.restaurantowner.com.** Articles, discussion forums and advertisements can provide you with helpful information as you begin your equipment shopping.
- ✓ **Fermag.com.** This Web site from *Foodservice Equipment Reports* magazine includes buyer guides for an array of common kitchen equipment categories, as well as in-depth articles on the nuances of coffee brewers or the ins and outs of ice makers. It's not exactly cocktail party chatter, but here you'll find incredibly useful information for the restaurateur equipping a kitchen for the first time or looking for replacement items.
- ✓ **Restaurant equipment dealers.** Many dealers have a wealth of knowledge and are very familiar with guiding beginning restaurateurs through the equipment selection and purchase process. But as with any major purchase, you'll want to do your homework: There are a few bad apples out there that can talk you into overbuying, or sell you equipment that doesn't perform as promised. Ask around for who offers reputable and responsive service in your area; your state chapter of the National Restaurant Association (www.restaurant.org) might be a good place to start, or talk with local operators who have successful restaurants.
- ✓ **Professional foodservice designers.** If your operation is large, you may want to retain the services of a kitchen specialist. A good way to find experienced pros in your area is to visit www.fcsi.org, the Web site for the Foodservice Consultants Society International (FCSI). Full FCSI members must qualify by passing exams that demonstrate their knowledge of equipment, planning and foodservice operations, so you can be sure you're getting solid advice. Another plus: FCSI members are honor-bound to have no financial ties to any equipment manufacturer nor are they allowed to sell equipment, so you can be sure you're getting an unbiased opinion. Rates and services vary from consultant to consultant, so be sure to discuss your needs as candidly as possible when you shop for a designer so that you can get an accurate quote for the assistance your restaurant requires.
- ✓ **Nafem.org.** Want to find a list of all the domestic manufacturers of low-boy refrigerators or iced tea brewers? The North American Association of Food Equipment Manufacturers (NAFEM) has a Web site that allows you to search by manufacturer or by product type. The organization also puts on a massive trade show every two years where you can see just about everything imaginable for your kitchen — and a few things you probably haven't even heard of. It's a restaurant geek's paradise, but be on the safe side and leave your checkbook at home until you've had a chance to evaluate your menu, measure your space, and check out what your colleagues have to say.
- ✓ **Trade shows.** Particularly national restaurant trade shows, like the National Restaurant Association show, are great opportunities to inspect a variety of gear under one roof, and talk to manufacturers and other restaurateurs, before buying.